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Helms Sure He Told Johnson of CIA Mail Snooping

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WASHINGTON — Former CIA director Richard Helms testified yesterday that he believed but could not prove that he told President Lyndon B. Johnson about an illegal CIA mail-opening project.

Appearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Helms disagreed with former Postmasters General J. Edward Day and Winton Blount, who testified earlier that the CIA had never told them that it was opening one of every letters to and from the Soviet Union. The project began in 1953 and continued for 20 years.

Helms, now the U. S. ambassador to Iran, said that to his knowledge Presidents Richard M. Nixon, Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy were not told of the mail opening while they were in office.

He said he believed that in 1967, while he was discussing CIA operations with Johnson, he had told him that the CIA had been illegally reading the U. S.-Soviet mail.

He said there was no record or memorandum "to support this belief."

Helms said that despite the testimony of Day, Postmaster General at the beginning of the Kennedy Administration, he stood by a memo he wrote 14 years ago saying that in a briefing by the late CIA Director Allen Dulles, "no relevant details were withheld" from Day about the mail opening.

Helms said Blount, who was Postmaster in the Nixon Administration, was shown photographs of the contents of one or more letters.

Another former postmaster general

John Gronouski, told the committee that the only reason he had not stopped the operation when he was in office during the Johnson Administration was that he had never been told that it existed.

Committee Chairman Frank Church (D., Idaho) asked Helms to

justify a memo over his signature in which Nixon was told that all mail-cover operations had been halted.

Church said the CIA was opening the mail then and continued to do so even after Nixon had ordered an end to the practice.

"There was no intention to mislead or lie to the President," Helms said.

Church said attempts were being made to secure the testimony of Nixon. He also said former Attorney General John N. Mitchell would be called to testify.

Helms said Mitchell assured him he had no qualms about the value of the mail-opening project and had specifically allowed it to continue.